

BUFFALO LAKE WATER INJECTION PROPOSAL

A Presentation to the EIA Hearings by Michael O'Brien of Red Deer
at Alix on May 22nd, 1991

The Buffalo Lake stabilization plan is similar in outlook and effect to many others proposed by the Alberta Government: a large, important, age-old and efficiently functioning natural system, which is also being utilized for the pleasure of man, has been and almost certainly will continue to be compromised through short sighted and financially irresponsible and destructive environmental tinkering by a group of engineers whose major job assignment appears to be the exploitation of living systems for the profit or pleasure of a few friends of the government, and at a very large expense to the general taxpaying public and to the legitimate rights of future generations. The bitter irony of this is that this often repeated scenario is conducted in our province under the direction of a group masquerading under the title of an Environment Ministry, and who occasionally bother to hold hearings such as this one. The results of these hearings are traditionally ignored, unless isolated portions of them can be extracted to enhance the political agenda of the government or the pocket books of some of their cronies.

What, I ask you, is the justification of the expense of hearings like this one, anyway. The cost/benefits analysis done on this project should have alone precluded any further consideration of this outrageous vote buying scheme. However, apparently to try and duck the financial irresponsibility of the project, the smoke screen of an environmental hearing is foisted on the public to try and deflect an examination of the financial and ecological reality of this outlandish scheme. Where the environmental stakes are really massive, this government doesn't like to risk hearings at all - or if it does, and those on the Board of inquiry have the integrity to respect the evidence, it claims that environmental questions won't be considered or more usually appoints a more compliant board; which sort of Board is this?

In a radio interview this Monday, which prompted me to appear at these hearings, Minister Ken Kowalski stated that a dam on the Elbow River could not proceed immediately because there was a great deal of opposition to it. However, he assured the interviewer, his government was committed to the dam, so it definitely would proceed, though it might take a bit longer to get started because the public was opposed to it. This blatant disregard for informed public opinion on matters of the environment appears typical of that Minister's attitude towards the province's environment, and it clearly reveals, I suggest, who really is still in charge of the Alberta Environment agenda. The present Environment Minister, Mr. Kline, seems often to be kept as much in the dark as to the activities, plans, and documents of this department as is the general public. And if he should happen to take the side of the

public on any issue, he is promptly and publicly humiliated by his colleagues from the cabinet.

WHAT WILL STABILIZATION MEAN TO BUFFALO LAKE?

Let us remember a few simple ecological facts about the nature of Buffalo Lake and then perhaps the notion of stabilizing it can be seen for the absurdity it is. Lakes in the eastern region of the Province are not "stable"; their water levels fluctuate greatly over long time scales. The grasses and sedges essential to the ecology of the lake and have adapted to these fluctuations in water level. Indeed, many can not reproduce without a period of drought and low or no water levels. It is these sedges and grasses that form the base of the food pyramid of these lakes. Insects, amphibians, Canadian Toads and to a lesser degree other anuran species spawn and depend upon these sedges for habitat.

Stabilization, by limiting the extent of drought tolerant vegetation and variations in water levels, effectively limits all the other wildlife which depends upon it, up to and including the many varieties of water fowl which use this vegetation for nesting sites.

It is painfully obvious that only the ecologically illiterate could speak of "stabilizing" Buffalo Lake. The whole notion of "stability" is an outdated Edwardian vintage vision of nature as "eternal and unchanging". The reality of this area is one of vast and profound cycles of change over long time frames. The evidence of this is the perfect adaptation of the grasses, sedges and wildlife to these cyclical changes. "Stabilization" will not merely use a great deal of money at a time when the government is demanding restraint and pull backs from everyone else, but stabilization will essentially destroy the character and nature of Buffalo Lake forever.

JUST ANOTHER DRAINAGE DITCH?

We are told in the EIA report that one must not count the dollar cost of the first four development stages of this particular lake stabilization project when measuring the cost/benefit ratio of the stabilization proposal. This is patently absurd. The systematic destruction of the environment of Parlbay Creek has always been clearly linked to raising the water level in Buffalo Lake. The Parlbay engineering project has surreptitiously been going on for several years to prepare for the raising of the water level in Buffalo Lake for the advantage of a few motor boat owners and lake shore property owners.

The stabilization project would be rejected on any rational financial grounds, but it is also a project which, because it will be managed by Alberta Environment, will almost certainly have any real environmental concerns first placed at the bottom of the agenda and then quietly

ignored as the flashy and profitable engineering work and earth moving proceeds.

The typical attitude of environmental indifference which guides Alberta Environment is really too bad as far as the Buffalo Lake proposal is concerned. This project might actually have been made into an environmentally defensible project. The creeks which are to provide an inlet and outlet to the lake could have been used in such a way as to enhance the environment along them. An increased flow could have created additional wetlands and greenery along their banks and meanders and could have restored wildlife habitat lost to earlier drainage attempts. Tax incentives could have alleviated any financial pain that landowners might have felt who might have lost a little hay production in wet years - wet years which may or may not come again.

Attention to the spawning needs of the lake's fish that have depended on the creeks for longer than our knowledge of this land, might have been attempted, instead of some engineer's fanciful idea of how fish biology works. Plants, trees and shrubs compatible with the feed and nesting requirements of our native birds could have turned the creeks into one long ribbon of life amidst the farmlands which are gradually becoming so thoroughly destructive to wildlife of most kinds because of the economic pressures faced by the landowners.

A natural creek feeds Buffalo Lake, and probably has for thousands of years. It could have been used to carry water pumped and piped from the Red Deer to enhance the flow of water through the natural creek channel and into the Lake. But creeks are an anathema to engineers. They don't travel in straight lines. They have irregular bottoms and widths and so their flow is difficult to measure and quantify and graph. Sometimes they get the surrounding land of potential political supporters wet when they spill their banks. Worse, their natural banks provide anchoring sites that can be used by their competition - beavers - to construct dams.

Worse still, other wild things live in and around creeks, things engineers don't study about about, don't know about, and obviously don't care about.

Over the years, and to facilitate the eventual deepening of Buffalo Lake, Parlbay Creek has been turned into a storm sewer. This ditch, which would be greatly extended by the proposal before you has certainly contributed to the immense provincial debt which we in the wealthiest of provinces have somehow magically accumulated; a debt that this department has helped to create by its many land draining, and other anti-environment schemes. Various excuses have been given for the relentless construction of this drainage ditch but, as this Government has learned, if you deny anything is happening, if you prevent environmental hearings from being conducted on the early stages of the project, if you ignore the results of the impact studies that you have instituted, if you stonewall or

ignore or lie to the public long enough then you can claim, once again, that the project is far too near to completion to stop or change now. Sounds familiar, doesn't it. I expect you followed the Oldman Dam building process.

Following this tried and true formula, the rich living biology of Parlby creek has been pretty well destroyed by Alberta Environment. Woe betide a creature whose instincts guide it to this creek for a drink, or to try to cross it. The evenly engineered and slippery slopes of the deep ditch will soon see to the slithering descent of wild creatures into the raceway below. Escape from the ditch is akin to scaling the fabled glass mountain on horseback.

Restoring the damage done by Alberta Environment to the Parlby Creek would be a much more worthy expenditure of public money than throwing good money after bad by further damaging Buffalo Lake by "stabilizing" it.

In the creek, organisms that used to live in or beside the water, deprived of overhangs, of backwaters, of channel meanders, of beaver dams, of protecting and oxygen creating deadfalls, of ground with varying degrees of moisture, of flooded back channels, most of these organisms - whether microscopic, furred, feathered, or plant life - conveniently disappear. They disappear, not because they have gone somewhere else. They disappear because they cease to exist, as do the creatures which feed on them and in turn become part of a food chain that is essential to any living water system, and to the food chain of the lake, and eventually even of the ocean at its end.

"Great things, these drainage ditches", claim the engineers hired by Alberta Environment. They drain all the sloughs and a few farmers get a few extra tons of hay at public expense - of course now they have to buy fertilizer since the seasonal flooding doesn't enrich the meadows any longer. The fish that used to use the creek and the adjacent meadows and sloughs to spawn in haven't seemed to figure out how to utilize the extra silt generated by the accelerated water flow of the ditch. Nor have they figured out how to climb the neat galvanized fish ladders, but since they obviously learned how to use the old creek, they shouldn't have any trouble learning to use the new improve one, now should they - thinks (sic) the engineer.

HOW ABOUT A SECOND DRAINAGE DITCH, BOYS

Tail Creek drains Buffalo Lake, as the explorer David Thompson discovered in the late 1700's. But others had discovered it long before him. Encampments rivalling the population of Stettler had gathered on its banks and at its junction with the Red Deer River to hunt the then abundant Buffalo and other animals of the region. Having Tail Creek utilized as the outflow for the overflowing lake would have some

advantages if the water level in the creek were somewhat more abundant and regular. However, as the study explains, the engineers want to replace the creek with a ditch to a point where it is convenient to place a dam, thus destroying the habitat created by the present creek. Below their dam they will continue to destroy the creek with more ditch, not believing that a creek can transport water.

Then, where the creek enters the river, they want to destroy the remaining bit of this once vibrant and abundant natural system by building more ditch. In the process, they will destroy the abundant archeological sites that could have proven a real and lasting tourist draw for the district, sites that are probably only surpassed by the ones drowned by the construction of the Oldman Dam.

They would love to channelize this creek too, that is - turn it into another sterile ditch, just in case they actually want to release some water in a particularly wet spring. They don't really expect this to happen, but building ditches keeps them employed, it's their life work.

Well, they won't have any difficulty turning Tail Creek into another ditch; they've had lots of practice doing that with Parlby Creek and any other moving, living, naturally abundant body of water they can get their hands on.

I guess I've said enough about creeks and ditches, and I apologize for appearing so angry about this, but it is infuriating to have an agency that the public thinks is supposed to be there to protect the environment, but which has no mandate or history of trying to do this. The objective of the department is the old fashioned one of trying to figure out how to help land owners and industry make money from exploiting the environment by ignoring the mistakes of the past and by forgetting about the future.

There is another and brief thing I noticed in reading the EIA report that I would just like to comment on in passing. It was rather amusing to me, but might give rise to some questions from the folks in Mirror.

It seems that the river water to be brought in to raise Alix Lake must not be considered suitable for drinking by the townspeople, because it isn't as good as their current well water. The report suggests though that the ditch water will be just fine for drinking needs of Mirror residents. I guess Mirror residents are thought to have glass lined stomachs.

This reminded me of the claims of Alberta Environment when the Dickson Dam on the Red Deer River was being sold to the people of Red Deer. We were told that the dam would improve out water supply and solve our sewage disposal problems all in one great flush. However, even before the dam was completed, Red Deer had to double its water treatment capacity and also double its sewage treatment plant. The Department of

Environment's dam didn't bring taxes down in Red Deer, it brought them up.

The other thing in the report that I would like to mention is the illusion that this project will enhance the lake and creek fishery. Note that one is told not to eat the fish caught in the Red Deer River because they are contaminated with mercury. Pumping Red Deer River water into the lake will also pump the mercury contamination into it. The exact source of the mercury isn't known, but it seems, according to the chemists I know, that it can't be from natural sources as Alberta Environment claims, it's more likely from the Regional Hospital and perhaps other industrial sources.

So remember, warn your grandchildren not to eat the fish. Just throw them away to rot as we must along the Red Deer.

I hope, that as the vegetation and food chain of Buffalo Lake dissapears, as the birds and animals and insects and plants along the Parlbay and Tail Creeks continue to die and dissapear, as people wonder why the people of this region allowed the destruction of some of the last Piping Plover habitat of the prairies, as the number of fish continue to decline because of the collapse of the food chain and because they no longer have places to spawn, as the lake silts up and the water level continues to be raised to accommodate the motor boats which swamp the nesting sites of any remaining water birds, that you won't blame the sewage from the people of Red Deer for your troubles. Remember also your friends from the Alberta Department of the Environment.

Thank you.